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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (02/26): WHAT WASHINGTON CAN DO
TO SHOW "GOODWILL AND SERIOUSNESS"

Main Stories:

All papers lead with news that the Palestinian national reconciliation conference will begin in Cairo on February 26. The papers report that Fatah and Hamas representatives, Azzam Al Ahmad and Mahmud Zahhar, held their first joint press conference in Cairo on February 25 to announce agreement on several issues including a halt to negative media campaigns, the release of all "political prisoners," and the formation of two joint committees. The joint committees will monitor Fatah-Hamas agreements regarding Gaza and the West Bank, respectively. Both groups described the two February 25 meetings in Cairo as "positive." In related news, Al Quds' front page runs an AFP story reporting that UK Foreign Minister Miliband stated in Cairo on February 25 that the UK hopes the unity talks will result in the formation of a technocrat Palestinian Authority government that serves as a transitional government ahead of new elections next year.

Al Ayyam runs a front page report on "secret" U.S. criticism of Israel regarding the delay of humanitarian assistance into Gaza. Al Hayat Al Jadida's front page runs coverage of the same story, citing Israeli daily Haaretz in reporting that, "Washington pressures Israel to ease Gaza siege." Both papers report that Secretary Clinton sent messages last week to Israel expressing dismay over Israeli obstacles to humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The papers cite Haaretz in reporting that a senior U.S. official expressed "deep disappointment" to Israel over Israel's failure to do more to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Al Hayat Al Jadida adds that Israeli Foreign Ministry Spokesman Palmor denied any knowledge of such U.S. messages. Al Ayyam adds that prior to the visit of Secretary Clinton to Israel, Special Envoy Mitchell will likely deliver a "strong U.S. protest" to Israel about the issue during his visit on February 26. The papers underline that the U.S. protest comes in response to an 'embarrassing' incident during Senator

Kerry's visit to Gaza where he asked Israeli officials why trucks lined up at the crossing were denied entry into Gaza. Kerry was told that the trucks contained noodles that are not considered by Israel to be a "humanitarian need."

The papers run front page coverage of statements by Palestinian Authority Premier Fayyad revealing that his government will request \$2.8 billion in assistance to Gaza at the Gaza reconstruction donors' conference in Egypt. Al Ayyam's front page again confirms Secretary Clinton's attendance at the conference and notes an announcement by a "Russian diplomatic source" that the Middle East Quartet will meet during the conference.

All papers run front page coverage of statements by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas made in Stockholm on February 25. Abbas is quoted seeking an active European role in supporting peace efforts and establishing an independent Palestinian state. He also called on the new Israeli government to honor previous agreements and remove checkpoints in the Palestinian Territories. Abbas' statements were made at a joint press conference with the Swedish Premier who is quoted stating that Sweden will support Palestinian reconciliation talks upon assuming the EU presidency.

Al Quds and Al Hayat Al Jadida front page statements by Egyptian Foreign Minister Abu Al Ghayt hoping to see positive developments on prisoner exchange and Gaza truce agreements between Israel and Hamas. Al Ayyam's front page, also inside Al Quds, quotes statements by Israeli Premier Olmert urging Hamas to wrap up the prisoner exchange deal before he leaves office, noting that negotiations with his successor Premier may be more difficult.

Al Hayat Al Jadida's front page reports that Israeli forces arrested

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52 Palestinians throughout the West Bank on February 25. Al Ayyam's front page runs statements by Israeli Foreign Minister Livni in Jerusalem, threatening the launch of new military operations in Gaza to halt arms smuggling.-----

BLOCK QUOTES:

1) Al Quds' editorial is titled, "Never before has there been such a need for unity and peace"(02/26): "In his comprehensive speech before the Congress, which seemed truthful and realistic, President Obama declared Washington's commitment to the peace process between Israel and its neighbors, and announced that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will visit the region on March 3 and 4 next month; and that U.S. envoy George Mitchell will open a permanent office for America in Jerusalem in order to keep contacts flowing and stress U.S. commitment to the peace process...The American position on the peace process seems serious in principle, but it is a vague commitment that lacks serious urgent steps. Washington can, for instance, stop the displacement of dozens of [Palestinian] families and demolition of dozens of houses in Silwan [in East Jerusalem] as a gesture of goodwill and as an indication of seriousness. It can also prevent the establishment of a settlement east of Jerusalem [E1 area]. Then its office in Jerusalem and declared commitment to the cause of peace, would earn credibility, something we need now more than ever before..."

2) Abdul Majid Swaylim opines in Al Ayyam under the title, "Dialogue or Negotiation?"(02/26): "The events that preceded [internal Palestinian] dialogue... suggest that,if we talks start at all... [the talks will be] a negotiation process more than anything else... [other]negotiations, for instance, between the U.S. and Iran and the success or failure of these negotiations will sharply affect the success of internal Palestinian negotiations, and the same applies to U.S.-Syrian negotiations, Israeli-Syrian negotiations and developments in Lebanon. [All] will affect... the ability of Palestinian factions to progress on various [internal] issues."

WALLES